Silences in *Emma*

Akehisa Chatani

Jane Austen often uses abstract moral concepts in her novels and so seemingly passes moral judgement constantly. And yet, as E. M. Forster says, her characters are "never two-dimensional"; they are "round, or capable of rotundity."[1] Could a moralizer depict people in such a round, tangible way as she does? Walter Allen points out the affinity between her morality and Samuel Johnson's, suggesting that "a massive common sense and an integrity determined to face all the facts of life without seeking refuge in illusion" they have in common has some key to her mastery as a novelist.[2] Dr. Johnson's moralism may be the one which grasps the humanity as a complex whole, but the moral code they may share will not explain very well her characters' rotundity, which seems to be first and foremost an artistic problem, a problem of how the delineation of her characters is rendered. It is true that we feel this artistic achievement of hers is strongly connected with her moral criticism against her characters. But when we try to explain the connection, we realize how organic the moralist and artist coexist in her and therefore how difficult it is to expound the nature of that connection.

The difficulty probably arises from this: the meaning of her moralist aspect in her art does not necessarily lie in the moral statements themselves which the reader thinks he finds her making as her convictions. What is more important is probably the movement of her mind itself, the kinetics of her critical mentality as it were. And probably what drives her to put her mind ceaselessly in a critical state is the awareness that if one is to conduct oneself rightly, the mind as a whole has to respond to an actual situation. It seems to me that she is acutely aware that actual situations are multidimensional and that her criticism is directed against how successfully a person reacts to the multi-

dimensional realities. She derides our failure to become sufficiently conscious of the complex totality with which we experience realities, but since the totality of experience is ineffable, she knows she has no way to show our lack of consciousness of it directly. Therefore her method has to become strategic, and her derision subtle.

The view that Jane Austen is an eithteenth-century moralist may be an established one[3], but her morality has some universal aspect or timelessness which cannot be confined to the thought of a particular age or a particular century. D.D.Devlin points out that her view of education, which he says all her novels are concerned about, is a very "ancient" one, such as Plato's.[4] I think Jane Austen is a moralist in the classical sense in that her theme, if it can be abstracted, is always a classical one, such as the difficulty of self-knowledge or the subtlety of the middle way. I myself see here a similarity between her and Confucius. But the similarity I cannot but see between them is not only about their view in themselves as moralists. They also seem alike in the peculiarly elusive, sometimes even misleading way of adopting conceptual terms or generalization. Confucius' words are not necessarily, as many people misunderstand, static statements of his moral principle. Many seemingly conceptional ideas he uses are intended to urge us to imagine something too elusive to be stated directly. It demands a great deal of imagination and alertness on our part. And this is exactly the way Jane Austen adopts abstract concepts. See, for example, how she uses two concepts "ease" and "elegance" in the following passage in *Emma*.

> She did not really like her. She would not be in a hurry to find fault, but she suspected that there was no elegance; ease but no elegance.[5]

Here we must not think that the word "elegance" is used as a concept expressing a static value; its true meaning, just momentarily defined here, is established only by being contrasted with "ease". And "ease" assumes a kind of shallowness by letting itself be juxtaposed with

"elegance". The mutual definition of these two concepts creates a fluid, movable but strangely accurate image of a person whose appearance we can imagine and whose actuality we can believe.

In fact, Jane Austen uses so many conceptual words that when we quote a short passage from her novels it sometimes appears as if it were engaging in abstract theorizing. This contradicts our impression of the verisimilitude of her characters. In the following example, Mr Knightley discusses Jane Fairfax's real character by using abstract words such as "sensibilities", "forbearance", "patience", "self-control", and "openness".

> 'Jane Fairfax has feeling,' said Mr Knightley; 'I do not accuse her of want of feeling. Her sensibilities, I suspect, are strong, and her temper excellent in its power of forbearance, patience, self-control; but it wants openness.'[6]

In the context of the story, however, this argument of his creates in our mind's eye a tangible image of a girl who has been so far a mystical, ambiguous figure. We feel that what he says is precise. But his argument itself can be considered abstract, or at least you can find a theoretical basic idea in it; we can, if we want, sum it up as a discussion about the problem of equilibrium between "sensibilities" and "openness", for it has the appearance of abstraction or generalization. But when Mrs Elton discusses Jane's weakness from a similar generalized standpoint, it sounds totally inane and false.

> '... I am no advocate for entire seclusion. I think, on the contrary, when people shut themselves up entirely from society, it is a very bad thing; and that it is much more advisable to mix in the world in a proper degree, without living in it either too much or too little.'[7]

As far as the basic ideas behind the two arguments are concerned, their points are identical; they are concerned with the same problem: the

difficulty of hitting the happy mean. They share the same principle or axiom. And it is in itself a sensible one. Why then do we feel Mr Knightley's grasp is dynamic as well as precise while Mrs Elton preaches pointlessly? In other words, why do we feel Mr Knightley's usage of general concepts works vigorously but Mrs Elton's becomes generalization for its own sake? And why does the author confound us, or frustrate our sense of subtlety, by letting a superior mind and a stupid one express a similar thought based on a similar principle?

I think Mrs Elton's statement sounds false not because she makes a remark which is irrelevant in itself but because she makes the remark irrelevantly; she talks without seeing. Mr Knightley never ceases trying to see more even while judging, but she has stopped seeing and is in fact thinking only of herself while talking. Jane Austen deliberately presents her as a person whose stupidity or inanity lies in her inability to become silent at times to see properly and absorb, as it were, nonverbal information placed before her, while Mr Knightly is presented as a superb silent observer.

> They (Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax) were entering the hall. Mr Knightley's eyes had preceded Miss Bates's in a glance at Jane. From Frank Churchill's face, where he thought he saw confusion suppressed or laughed away, he had involuntarily turned to her's; but she was indeed behind, and too busy with her shawl. Mr Weston had walked in. The two other gentlemen waited at the door to let her pass. Mr Knightley suspected in Frank Churchill the determination of catching her eye—he seemed watching her intently—in vain, however, if it were so—Jane passed between them into the hall, and looked at neither.[8]

In fact silence seems to be given a decisive meaning in *Emma*, where it is often used as a significant moment in which a character's moral capacity is tested. Emma and Mr Knightley are remarkable in that they often become absorbingly silent and attentive. They are never

reticent, their words can be cogent, but their verbal capacity is counterbalanced by their capacity for silence. It is as if their true superiority lies in their intuitive knowledge that we can and do get far more information from observation than from words. Thus when Hariet says she feels a man is interested in her, Emma's advice is "Be observant of him. Let his behaviour be the guide of your sensations." and when Mrs Elton's visit is returned, Emma thinks she can "then see more and judge better." And in order to see well, the hero and the heroine even deliberately make inconspicuous efforts:

> Frank Churchill placed a word before Miss Fairfax. She gave a slight glance round the table, and applied herself to it. Frank was next to Emma, Jane opposite to them; and Mr Knightley so placed as to see them all; and it was his object to see as much as he could, with as little apparent observation.[9]

As a result of such a conscious effort, seeing provides them with visible clues which can be enigmatic, indecipherable or misleading:

> ...and, when, on glancing her eye towards Jane Fairfax, she [Emma] caught the remains of a smile; when she saw that, with all the deep blush of consciousness, there had been a smile of secret delight, she had less scruple in the amusement, and much less compunction with respect to her. This amiable, upright, perfect Jane Fairfax, was apparently cherishing very reprehensible feelings.[10]

Silently but vigorously Emma observes, guesses and judges. What is visible are the only clues. Hence the total concentration of the senses:

> He [Mr Knightley] was silent. She believed he was looking at her; probably reflecting on what she had said, and trying to understand the manner. She heard him sigh.[11]

One look is probed; and though fallibility is inevitable, a vast amount of information is silently sought for and received: a vast amount of mental engergy reciprocates. Emma senses Mr Knightley's total presence. It is physical and mental simultaneously.

> Emma was sure he had not forgiven her; he looked unlike himself.[12]

One look tells Emma everything; her blunder and her having been aware of it, Mr Knightley's physical presence, his ethical view with which she is familiar, their relationship and his disappointment in her. But the author chooses not to enumerate them. The silence is full of complex meaning but it should be directly felt. The author writes that Mr Knightley "looked unlike himself" but not only an enumeration of his mental states is avoided but also there is no concrete physical descriptions which may provide the reader with clues about them. It is a sight, a silent appearance, a simple depiction of what Emma sees, but it forces us, as well as Emma, to review the whole personality of Mr Knightley. We unwittingly take the trouble to ask ourselves how his normal appearance has been previously; we try to remember his past words and actions; we find ourselves thinking of what he has believed so far. We even try to recall or imagine what the author hasn't written about him. In short, we try to remember, guess and grasp his whole outlook on life.

The intentional avoidance of concrete physical description, which is conspicuous in Jane Austen's art, seems to contradict two things. First it seems to contradict the vividness of their physical presences with which we remember the characters. And it seems to contradict, particularly in *Emma*, the stress the author apparently puts on the importance of seeing or being silently observant. In the passage quoted above, Emma sees Mr Knightly with painful concern, but the physical descriptions are eluded. The reason may be epistemological rather than technical. For her seeing is not a matter of exterior observation. It transfixes her deeply because the multiplicity of a mind, that is, of Mr

Knightley's is, in an instant, revealed before her eye. What she sees, and what the reader is forced to see through her eye, is the vision of that psychic complexity. A concrete physical description may be able to suggest a sentiment, but it is inevitably subjected to an allurement of a particular interpretation. And collected descriptions of that nature lead us to a limited number of interpretations or explanations, which are not only the abstraction out of a multiplied but indivisible experience but also the verbalization of an immediate sensory experience. It disturbs the immediacy of the vision, the multiplied wholeness of seeing.

When Mr Knightley "looked unlike himself", Emma sees his criticism on his look. His facial expression as a whole is felt as his critical judgement. But what is important here is that it is not only the expression of his criticism but also the potentiality of hers, because she has seen and felt it; because she has perceived his look as such and is responding to it as such. The two persons are in a concentrated state of mind which enables both of them to share a tacit recognition of a complex but insightful judgement.

For Jane Austen, seeing in silence is the basis for, and the source of, criticism, because only the intensity of silent observation gives us a chance to free ourselves from the verbal trap. On the other hand, we obviously cannot go very far without relying on words, that is, without accepting their generalizing, conceptual power over realities; we need concepts, or generalizations, for the sake of showing their limitations and by so doing showing what the limitations suggest. This roundabout way is probably necessary to show the complex totality of human experience.

Silence, however, does not always give you a right answer mechanically. The more comprehensive the silence is, the more unavoidable the possibility of misinterpretation and confusion becomes. But when you get the right answer as a result of deep silence, it comes like a revelation, with "all the wonderful velocity of thought":

> Emma's eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating in a fixed attitude, for a few minutes. A few

> minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart... She touched, she admitted, she acknowledged the whole truth... It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr Knightley must marry no one but herself! ... Her own conduct, as well as her own heart, was before her in the same few minutes. She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before.[13]

When we say Jane Austen's characters are round or capable of rotundity, we mean we can imagine how they will act in situations the author never mentions; we see them as if they had acquired objectivity independent of the fiction; we feel their habitual manners of responding to a given reality are comprehensively criticized and thus wholly grasped, so that we can believe they will repeat themselves in any situation. Why does this occur when Jane Austen's novels are full of seemingly trite concepts and devoid of minutist descriptions of psychology? What is the knack of hers for creating such an illusion?

As human experience consists of both ideas and the senses, her strategy is simply to adopt generalization and observation with equal intensity. Generalization has to be shown as always irrelevant, but its irrelevancy is worth being incessantly and delicately disclosed, because only through it can we suggest the totality of realities, which always slips through direct verbalization. For generalization is most powerful when it is properly negated. In other words, it has to be modulated by observation. But a kind of overly detailed descriptiveness which minute observation has as its danger must also be counteracted by a conceptual or generalizing effort of a concentrated mind. Generalization and observation, thus mutually frustrating and invigorating, create unsettled silence charged with nebulous misconceptions and insights. This also creates in us an unsettled nebulous state of mind, which we are forced to be in on the brink of touching the complexity of human conduct. To sustain this unsettledness, our whole mind begins to work, our own past experience in life is recalled, and thus with the total cooperation of our imagination, the characters round out.

NOTE

1. E.M.Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.82
2. Walter Allen, *The English Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.109
3. Ibid.
4. D.D.Devlin, *Jane Austen and Education* (London:Macmillan,1975) p.1
5. Jane Austen, *Emma* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.273
6. Ibid.,p.290
7. Ibid.,p.277
8. Ibid.,p.343
9. Ibid.,p.344
10. Ibid.,p.249
11. Ibid.,p.265
12. Ibid.,p.377
13. Ibid.,p.398